

# Interpreting Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve

Gretchen Luxenberg

**T**he interpretation of cultural landscapes is a challenge not many are prepared to deal with just yet in most national parks. The whole concept of a cultural landscape as a type of cultural resource still remains elusive for many professional land managers, and the idea of presenting the cultural values of a specific landscape to the general public in an attractive and comprehensible manner can be intimidating. We can easily understand a historic building that stands before us, and perhaps visualize the now-imaginary military troops marching across a field in preparation for a battle, but getting a grasp on historic land use or settlement patterns, or the relationships and associations between the diverse natural and constructed components of a landscape, is a bit more esoteric for the average visitor. Additionally, since change is inherent in cultural landscapes, interpreting change is an important component of explaining the character of a landscape to the public. Add to these factors, a cultural landscape almost entirely under private ownership in which the National Park Service (NPS) must provide an interpretive program, and you have the challenge in interpreting Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve.

At Ebey's Landing, an important accord exists between the four partners administering and managing the Reserve and an open-minded citizenry in the community, that allows for such a successful and harmonious program to be underway in the nation's first historical reserve. In spite of the numerous issues and challenges facing the interpretation of this remarkable landscape, a cultural landscape message is getting out to the community and

park visitor. This article describes the various ways in which the NPS is fulfilling its role of providing interpretation at Ebey's Landing, and the specific means by which the cultural landscape is being interpreted.

Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve is a non-traditional unit in the national park system that was established in 1978. It is located on central Whidbey Island in Washington State's scenic Puget Sound region. The Reserve is managed by a Trust Board, a group of dedicated individuals representing the four parties of the partnership—the Town of Coupeville, Island County government, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, and the NPS.

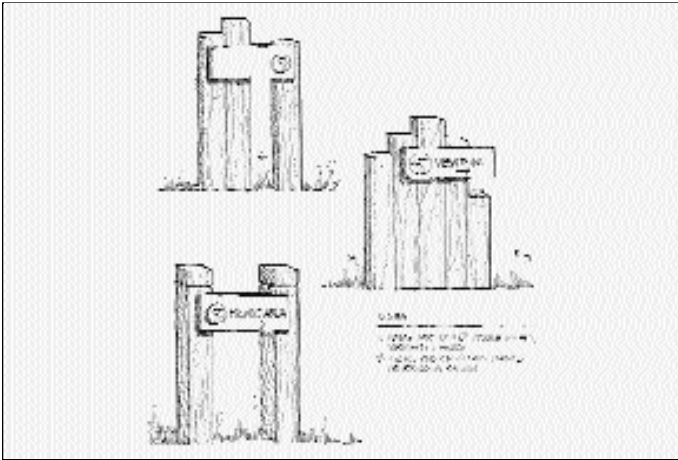
The Reserve encompasses 17,400 acres, replete with dramatic coastal bluffs and beaches, dense evergreen forests, wetlands teeming with wildlife, and agricultural fields that transform prairies into a patchwork that sweeps into gently rolling uplands. All of that is embellished with a small town, historic buildings, structures, roads, thick hedgerows, and other signs that the open, rural landscape has been shaped by humans for many years. It is a visually rich landscape, one that reflects the story of human exploration, land use, settlement, and development in the Pacific Northwest for centuries. It is not frozen in time, nor was it ever intended for this landscape to remain stagnant from the time of its inception as a national park unit. The Reserve was established to preserve and protect a valuable cultural landscape while allowing for a viable community with a distinct lifestyle to continue to grow and develop while respecting what remains of its past. The process by which that is achieved captures the essence of the Reserve's interpretive program's message.

The absence of a traditional NPS interpretive program at the Reserve provided a forum for a more creative approach to interpretation. A citizens' planning committee was convened shortly after the establishment of the Reserve by the four partners as a means of providing recommendations for interpretation (among other things). Early on in the planning process it was determined that

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Ebey's Landing (left) and Ebey's Prairie (right). Photos by author.



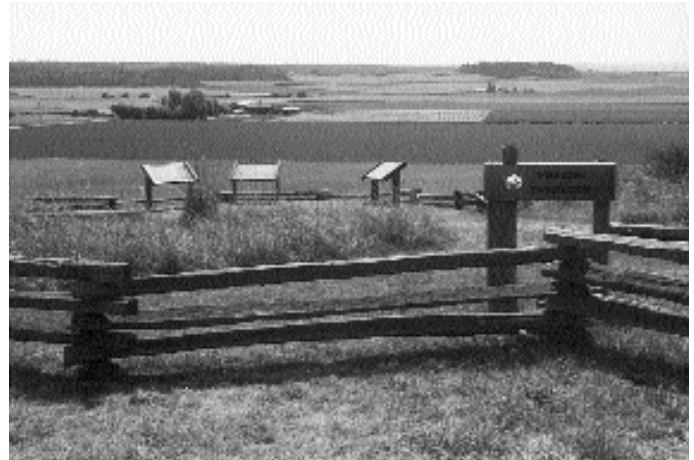
Graphic from *Visual Compatibility Guidelines* illustrating the proposed character of the prairie interpretive facilities.

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the NPS would install a system of wayside pull-offs and exhibits. However, there would not be a NPS visitor center built, nor would there be NPS staff stationed daily at the Reserve. It was agreed that NPS would install the interpretive exhibits, in cooperation with the other Reserve partners and, when necessary and feasible, purchase land outright for a pull-off if an easement or agreement could not be worked out with the property owner.

Based on recommendations by the committee, NPS staff prepared an **Interpretive Prospectus** and a **Wayside Exhibit Plan** with a passive or non-personal approach programmed for interpretation at the Reserve. The interpretive message is disseminated in several ways, all of which seem familiar to those working in the NPS, but which have been adapted to “fit” into the Reserve to minimize the impact imposed upon the landscape. In order to accomplish an appropriate “fit” in the landscape, it was decided that there would be no standard design applied to waysides and exhibits across the Reserve; beach locations would receive different treatment from farmland or woodland interpretive locations. Local citizens made it clear to the NPS that they did not want their home to become littered with visual intrusions, even if those intrusions were deemed useful tools for interpreting the area to the public. So, for example, standard, low profile mounts were used in several locations, but a standard NPS-designed kiosk was modified for use in the Reserve to be more sensitive to the character of the landscape and concerns of the community. In order to minimize the visual presence of the exhibits and ensure compatibility with the character of the landscape, *Visual Compatibility Guidelines* were prepared specifically for the Reserve, and these have become important instructions for the installation of interpretive facilities.

There are a total of 12 facilities or sites within the Reserve wherein interpretation takes place. Most are in place through cooperative agreements primarily with Island County and Washington State governmental agencies. How these interpretive “packages” were compiled and “sold” to the land owners varies greatly from site-to-site. For example, through a scenic easement placed over the eastern quarter of the Island County Historical Society’s property in downtown Coupeville, an open vista to Penn Cove is protected in perpetuity and the NPS has



Prairie Overlook, located on a ridge overlooking Ebey’s Prairie, illustrates the interpretive facilities as implemented. Photo by author.

interpretive messages discussing the historic importance of the cove on the Island County Historical Society Museum’s porch (the easement devalued the property, allowing the Society to purchase the site and build the museum). Nearby, at the entrance to Coupeville’s historic wharf, a 50-year lease with the local port authority provides space for a three-sided kiosk with maps and messages on the Reserve.

Another example of a joint effort between the NPS, local government, and a private landowner to interpret the Reserve is the interpretive wayside at Monroe’s Landing, located on the north side of Penn Cove. Flanked by private ownership, a small, narrow parcel owned by the county (a road end to be exact), provided rare public beach and boat access. The area is also an archeological site, a shell midden from historic Salish Indian use and occupation. Although there was a parking lot on the site, it was undefined, its use was informal, and cars parked haphazardly. Cars also went “off road” and drove helter-skelter through adjacent beach grassland, causing significant impact to the archeological site. The NPS, with the blessing of the property owner and county, designed a sensitive bollard-and-chain boundary fence cordoning off the grassy beach area to protect the archeological resources, while providing definition to the parking lot. Other improvements included a bench, log parking stops, a garbage receptacle, and a low mount interpretive message that discusses the Indian use of the area.

Through a cooperative agreement with Washington State Parks, there are interpretive exhibits sited in Fort Casey and Fort Ebey state parks and on state park land at Ebey’s Landing beach. At Fort Ebey, a three-sided kiosk, designed specifically for the Reserve, has two Reserve-oriented panels while the third side accommodates special messages the state park ranger needs to announce. At Ebey’s Landing beach, deteriorated state park signage was replaced with the specially designed kiosk, followed by general parking lot and trail improvements. Through a cooperative agreement with the State Department of Transportation (DOT), there is a three-sided kiosk sited at the Whidbey Island-Port Townsend ferry terminal that orients visitors to the Reserve and discusses DOT ferry history. A low mount panel at the historic Crockett Blockhouse property (owned by Island County and maintained by a local chapter of the Lions Club) replaced



Three-sided kiosk located on state park land at Ebey's Landing Beach designed specifically for the Reserve. Photo by author.



Ebey's Prairie Wayside, one of two NPS-owned sites. Photo by author.

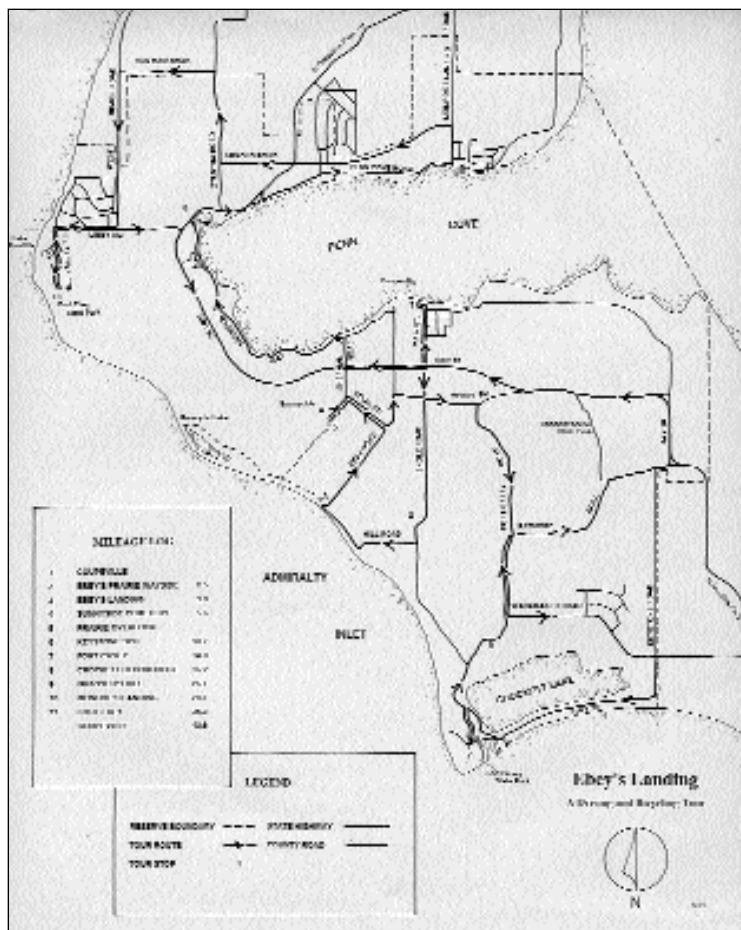
a deteriorated, "home-made" message board; the new panel is consistent with the design of signs and panels located elsewhere in the Reserve.

In nearly all cases, through the use of cooperative agreements or a lease, the NPS was able to make much needed physical improvements to sites and provide interpretive messages for residents and visitors alike, while a property owner provided the land at little or no cost to the government. There are only two interpretive waysides that resulted in the NPS purchasing land in fee simple title: the Ebey's Prairie Wayside along Engle Road (approximately 2.25 acres) and the Prairie Overlook (approximately 4 acres), up on a ridge overlooking the historic Ebey's Prairie. Each interpretive wayside, while specially designed to be in harmony with the character of that landscape (i.e., beach vs. prairie), has elements that are consistent (e.g., the Reserve's logo) and provide continuity from one site to the next.

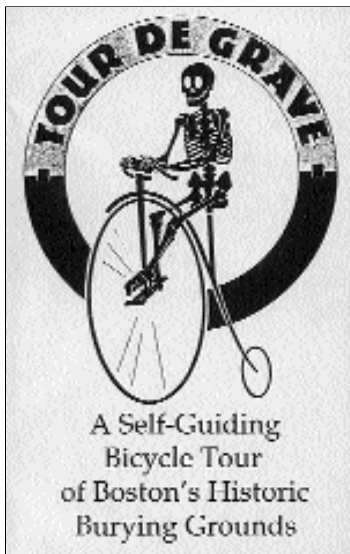
What do the messages say on all of these boards and panels? Four themes were identified by the NPS to be an essential part of the interpretive message at the Reserve: 1) the human history of the area, from Indian use and occupation up to the present time; 2) the natural history of the area, beginning with what the glaciers left behind; 3) the architecture of the Reserve (Ebey's Landing is a National Register historic district);

and 4) the visual resources of the area which create the character of the rural historic district. In addition, the interpretive message of how the Reserve was established, how it is managed, and how land is protected are concepts that were identified by the Trust Board as being valuable messages to publicize. Finally, the notion of respecting private property as a visitor travels throughout the Reserve was an important statement to make. This particular message is especially germane in the case of the Reserve hiking trail that runs, with the permission of a private landowner, along private farm fields before meeting up with public land.

The concept of a cultural landscape is perhaps the most difficult one to address in the amount of space one is permitted to use in these panels, in light of the size constraints and the educational level for which the information on these panels is intended. In this regard, the text on the exhibits is limited, but speaks to "landscapes of heritage," "places that we look at every day but never really see," and landscapes as "historical documents" that reveal the work and accomplishments of those who came before us. The notions of timelessness, patterns, and delicate change are only implied, as one reads about farms that have been farmed since the 1800s and are still being farmed today by



Driving and bicycling tour of Ebey's Landing NHR which introduces the visitor to the Reserve's scenery, recreational opportunities, and history. Illustration courtesy of Ebey's Landing NHR.



"Logo" for Tour de Grave, the self-guiding bicycle tour of Boston's Burial Grounds (left). Burial Ground Initiative staff provides background information on the history, craftsmanship, and preservation treatment of cemeteries and burial markers (right). Illustration courtesy of Boston Parks Department. Photo by author.

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annual fundraiser and awareness builder. The Parks Department publicizes the event, and generates promotional and educational materials (e.g., guide booklets with maps and basic site information) all of which are given to each registrant. The Tour de Graves is a means by which the entire system of burying grounds in Boston is interpreted. It is an opportunity to learn not only where these significant landscapes are, but why they have been sited in these locations, and their relationship to the growth of the city around them. It has engendered so much interest that parish cemeteries and private garden cemeteries have become involved.

The history of preservation with Boston's 16 historic burying grounds will hopefully be a story in itself for future visitors to Boston's burying grounds. While educa-

tion and outreach should be an end in itself, the Parks Department's efforts in programming historic cemeteries rounds out the initiative's overall plan.

Public involvement is an attractive element of a program which seeks private funding to achieve the preservation of these cultural landscapes. By identifying and implementing treatment and interpretive options for cemeteries as cultural landscapes, including a community outreach component, it is hoped that such a public-private endeavor will produce future stewards for these irreplaceable landscapes—thus ensuring a true long-term strategy of investment in a quiet constituency.

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Kathy Kottaridis was the project manager for the Historic Burying Ground Initiative. Currently she serves as the Director of Public Programs and Education for the Bostonian Society.

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descendants of early white settlers, or enduring patterns of community life.

The interpretive message addressing how these significant heritage lands are protected is a much easier concept to express. Language regarding the preservation of prairie land through the purchase of scenic easements that limit the development and use of property is understandable. The idea of cooperative efforts between property owners and the NPS to ensure protection of these historic agricultural lands is also not difficult to grasp, but there is never enough room to say what is needed other than the basic premise for the protection and management of the Reserve.

Other means of interpreting the Reserve, some of which are currently in place and others which are merely aspirations, include: a self-guided walking tour; an automobile/driving tour; beach/bluff hike; audio tours; scenic overlooks; and diverse publications, including brochures, a guidebook/handbook, or photographic essays or narrative histories of the area. While some interpretive facilities identified in the Interpretive Prospectus and Wayside Exhibit Plan have not been real-

ized because circumstances have changed since the original plans were devised, other opportunities have become available. With limited funding and staff, the Trust Board has had to take a "go slow" approach in its interpretive program. Ironically, or fortuitously, depending upon one's perspective, this has resulted in higher quality interpretive messages being relayed to the public. Given the unique character of Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, the type of resources within its boundaries, and its management structure, creative approaches to interpretation within the context of public/private cooperative ventures has been the key to success. To date, the feedback from residents of the Reserve community on the interpretive program has been positive; time will tell whether park visitors are enjoying and learning about the Reserve from the diverse manner in which the interpretive message is disseminated.

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